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State will get the shaft from mining

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An axiom of protecting America's natural heritage is that a win is only temporary, but a loss is forever.

Nowhere is this more true than open pit mines--immensely damaging projects that leave toxic scars on the public's land and cleanup liabilities with the taxpayers. Californians can look forward to more of the same if the proposed Glamis Imperial Project, near the Colorado River in eastern Imperial County, is approved.

Conservationists, Native American tribes and local residents thought this bad idea had been put to rest in the 1990s when then-Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt rejected the mine. The project is back, however, thanks to Babbitt's successor, Gale Norton. Mining interests have considerable influence with the Bush administration, and the Glamis project, about 45 miles from El Centro, appears to be another example of special interests calling in chits.

Unfortunately, the Bush administration appears to be overlooking or ignoring several important considerations. Left out of its political calculus was the toxic cyanide that will have to be poured over small mountains of low-grade ore to leach out tiny flecks of gold.

Or that the mine owners, once the mine has ceased operations, plan to leave behind an open pit, 850 feet deep, in the publicly owned California Desert Conservation Area.

Or that the intrusion would wreck a landscape held sacred by the Quechan Indians, contrary to the Interior Department's legal obligation to protect such lands.

Or that a huge industrial operation would mar the quality of natural experiences in the nearby Indian Pass wilderness area and the Picacho State Recreation Area.

Or that gouging a mine in a wild landscape would destroy or degrade 1,600 acres of habitat for desert tortoises, bighorn sheep and migratory birds.

Or that digging, operating and cleaning up after this unneeded mine would burn huge amounts of fuel and other energy that could be much better used elsewhere.

When the mining is done, can Americans feel comfortable that reclamation will be adequate and that they won't get stuck with the bill for yet another Superfund site? History doesn't give cause for optimism.

The West is pockmarked with mines that went bust and left the taxpayers with seven- and eight-figure cleanup tabs. Bureau of Land Management regulations do not mandate sufficient bonding to cover the costs when irresponsible companies fail to clean up after themselves. In the case of Glamis Imperial Corp., we already know the company won't finish the cleanup job. Glamis officials have announced that they plan to leave one of three pits unfilled after the mine is closed. The company says it won't be able to afford returning the desert to its former state. Such freeloading is reason enough to reject the mine.

As owners of the public lands, the taxpayers shouldn't have to do business with an irresponsible tenant. How many apartment owners would rent to a person who announced plans to leave a hole in the ceiling at the end of the lease?

Not to mention, some of the damage could not be cleaned up at any price. No amount of money could compensate for damage to the Quechans' cultural heritage. The Bush administration should uphold the original decision to reject the mine. Otherwise, as President Reagan was fond of saying, the federal government wouldn't be part of the solution but part of the problem.

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